

Samurai with Class

By Skip Williams



In the popular imagination, the samurai is a ferocious and volatile warrior, thanks to an inscrutable code of honor that drives him to seemingly random acts of violence and fanaticism. In truth, however, he is a cultured soldier who strives to be courteous, brave, and unswervingly loyal to his overlord.

The Pros and Cons of a Samurai

The samurai's combat abilities make him a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield.

Samurai Assets

The samurai class offers excellent combat benefits along with an array of special abilities than can demoralize foes. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a samurai.

- **High Hit Points:** The samurai's 10-sided Hit Dice let him absorb plenty of damage and keep right on going.
- **Good Armor Class:** A samurai is proficient with any kind of armor, but not with shields. Nevertheless, he usually has a formidable Armor Class to complement his excellent hit points.
- **Good Attack Bonus:** A samurai's base attack bonus is +1 per samurai level, which is the best in the game. Thus, he can dish out damage even better than he can take it.
- **Good Weapon Selection:** Though he fights best with the daisho (see below), the samurai can use any simple or martial weapon. Thus, he has access to some of the best weapons in the game.
- **Good Fortitude Saves:** A samurai uses the best save progression in the game for Fortitude saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural hardiness helps him resist most effects that attack his body, such as poison, polymorphing, and energy draining.
- **Daisho Abilities:** The daisho is a set of weapons consisting of a katana (bastard sword) and a wakizashi (short sword). Every samurai carries the daisho as a badge of rank. At your DM's option, your samurai may begin play with an heirloom (usually masterwork) daisho. In any case, he gains Exotic Weapon (bastard sword) as bonus feat at 1st level. As he attains levels, he learns to fight with the katana and the wakizashi in combination, effectively gaining the Two-Weapon Fighting feat when using those two weapons together. Later in his career, he gains the Improved Two-Weapon Fighting and Greater Two-Weapon fighting feats when using his katana and wakizashi together.
- **Kiai Abilities:** Starting at 3rd level, a samurai can shout once per day to improve his combat prowess. When he does so, he gains a bonus equal to his Charisma bonus (but always at least +1) on his attack and damage roll for one attack. At higher levels, he can use his kiai shout more often.
- **Iaijutsu:** Beginning at 5th level, a samurai gains Quick Draw as a bonus feat, though it applies only to use of his katana or wakizashi (or both). At 8th level, he becomes so speedy in combat that he gains Improved

Initiative as a bonus feat. This feat functions regardless of the weapon used.

- **Staredown:** Starting at 6th level, a samurai can disrupt a foe's composure with his piercing gaze, gaining a +4 bonus on Intimidate checks made to demoralize that foe. As he attains higher levels, he can use this ability to demoralize multiple foes. Eventually, he becomes so fearsome that he can put opponents to flight merely by drawing his blade.

Samurai Weaknesses

As with any other character, the samurai's advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a samurai character.

- **Low Skill Points:** At a mere two skill points per level, most samurai don't accumulate many skill ranks, even with quadruple skill points at 1st level. To make matters worse, the samurai's staredown ability relies on Intimidate checks, so he needs to accumulate at least a few ranks in the Intimidate skill. But committing a lot of skill points to Intimidate leaves even fewer available for purchasing other skills.
- **Poor Reflex and Will Saving Throws:** Samurai have the worst progression for Reflex and Will saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This drawback means they aren't so great at getting out of the way when the situation gets rough, nor can they easily shake off assaults on the mind.
- **Low Mobility:** A samurai's reliance on heavy armor tends to make him a slow mover on the battlefield.
- **Bushido:** A samurai must have a lawful alignment and may never act rudely, lie, be cowardly, or disobey an order from his overlord. In some campaigns, the overlord might be a distant figure who has little impact on play. In others, however, the samurai must be at his lord's back and call at all times -- a situation that can prove immensely frustrating for a player character. In any case, a character who must live by a particular set of rules can prove inconvenient, especially when those around him have no such restrictions.

Playing a Classy Samurai

Great samurai usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing one of these characters, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

Show Some Self-Control

A samurai's well-honed weapon skills and dedication to a code of honor are the products of a disciplined body and mind, so let your character's exceptional self-discipline show in play. Develop routines to handle common tasks such as setting the party marching order, making camp, and opening stuck doors. During adventures, set yourself a goal and stick to it. Avoid getting sidetracked by your allies' antics or by distractions that the DM might toss your way. You don't have to be overbearing or humorless, but don't be a rascal who acts on a whim, either. A touch of culture and refinement can add a suitable air of dignity as well. After all, a samurai who recites beautiful haiku is more believable than one who spouts off-color limericks.

Always Lead

Your natural place in a party is right in the front rank, where you can both take the fight to the enemy and place yourself between the opponents and more vulnerable party members.

Your leadership should also have a cerebral element. As someone who walks in the front rank, you're in a good position to decide where the party should go, so keep thinking about the group's next move.

You should seize the opportunity to provide your party with moral leadership as well. Discourage lawbreaking on the part of your companions and obey the local laws yourself. Be prepared to negotiate with any creatures that aren't immediately hostile, and don't forget your staredown abilities when a fight seems imminent. A staredown works best when you use it early in a battle, and you won't be in a good position to do so if some other character is setting the pace for your group.

Friends in Need

Your samurai's combat prowess provides a strong foundation for the party's overall fighting power. If you waste or misuse that ability, the whole party suffers. Likewise, the samurai needs the support of the rest of the party just to survive, so it pays for him to know how to scratch the backs of his fellow PCs.

The Party Scout: Stealthy characters such as rogues, rangers, and monks often get in over their heads, so plan to be part of the rescue party when necessary. Your fighting ability can be the key to getting the scout out of a tough situation alive.

On the other hand, some of the party scout's actions are likely to earn your disapproval. When they do, quietly demand that the offender make amends if possible. If you've successfully created a sense of dignity about your samurai, the mere threat of your disapproval should prove a deterrent to capricious behavior.

The Party's Arcane Spellcaster: Wizards, sorcerers, and bards can pack a real punch with their spells, and they often serve as the party's heavy artillery. But since such characters usually have poor Armor Classes and very few hit points, they must rely on you to keep the opposition at a distance.

The Party's Divine Spellcaster: Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric or druid. This character's healing spells can keep you on your feet so that you can continue to do your overlord's bidding.

Some Key Equipment

A samurai relies heavily on his gear, so it pays to collect the right equipment. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor and Shield:** If you're a samurai, it generally pays to get the best and heaviest armor you can afford because you'll need that boost to your Armor Class. Your inability to use shields makes other defensive items, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*, particularly useful to you. Keep in mind that several lesser items whose benefits stack give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item.

If you do a lot of wilderness adventuring, consider some backup armor, such as suit of studded leather (or a mithral chain shirt, if you can afford it) that you can wear at night. If you try to sleep in heavy armor you'll have penalties the next day. But if you sleep in your skivvies, you'll be in trouble if you're attacked in the night.

You can sometimes offset your lack of a shield by using items that enhance your Dexterity score. If you do so, however, make sure that your armor allows you to use your full Dexterity bonus. Heavy armor made of mithral can help you achieve that goal easily.

- **Primary Melee Weapon:** The katana is your weapon of choice, and it's a good one. When you're not also using your wakizashi, wield your katana in two hands so that you can deal extra damage with each strike.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon or two handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (for example, being swallowed whole by a big monster). Fortunately, your wakizashi falls into that category.

It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, since you normally rely on your katana (a slashing weapon), consider a morningstar (which deals both bludgeoning and piercing damage) as a backup.

- **Ranged Weapon:** Your foes won't always be within melee reach, and a ranged weapon can come in quite handy for those times. It also makes up nicely for your general lack of mobility. A composite bow is a great choice because you can spend a little extra money on it and add your Strength bonus to damage.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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